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ABSTRACT

A teacher at Western Illinois University, who had resisted using the portfolio system in a writing classroom, developed a shorter portfolio unit to incorporate the best aspects of portfolios without many of the disadvantages. By the beginning of the fifth week of the semester, the students had written three papers, participated in a peer exchange in class, put multiple entries in their reading journals, taken one peer's paper home to evaluate closely, chosen one essay to revise, written a cover letter to evaluate their process, and compiled a process portfolio. The teacher had graded one set of discovery drafts and one set of portfolios. The quality of the papers and the amount of reflection on their writing and reading processes evidenced in the students' cover letters and reading journals justified the slight increase in grading time. Some students did a second portfolio on authority instead of a research paper. (A peer worksheet is attached.) (RS)

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Portfolio Units in a Process Classroom

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Abstract

Developing shorter portfolio units rather than the more traditional semester-long portfolios used in many composition classes seemed to be a way to avoid many of the problems associated with portfolio use (switching to a system encouraging revisions of papers all semester; handling the increased paper load such a system encourages; postponing giving a grade until the end of the course; dealing with the resistance of four classes of writers each semester; and having to counter charges of grade inflation knowing that, with **the teacher's** help and a choice of their best work, most students would be able to create a portfolio worthy of a B or better by the end of the semester). This paper from the 1992 Miami University conference: New Directions in Portfolio Use describes a way to integrate a short portfolio unit with the more common process strategies used in composition pedagogy.

Areas discussed include assignments, evaluation, paper load, evaluation, use of a reading journal, and overall effectiveness of this strategy. Samples are given from discovery drafts along with the comments for revision by both teacher and peers. Finally, samples are given of the changes students made using this system as well as the final student evaluations of the process. One area which receives attention is the problems associated with one-draft writers when so much revision is emphasized.

List of References and Appendix containing criteria developed by students for peer discussions are included.

Portfolio Units in a Process Classroom

> Chris: The portfolio system is new to me. I have never had to submit work in this format before. I find both good and bad points about it. I like the fact that the work is seen as a whole; the work is a package. Logistically speaking, it is very easy on the students.
>
> Greg: In the first days of class, I had absolutely no idea what the process portfolio was; to be completely honest, I'm still not sure what it is supposed to be. All I do know is that by the end of this letter, the process portfolio will be done.

These comments from cover letters of students in English 280 reflected my own uncertainty about trying to use portfolios in my classroom. Switching to a system encouraging revisions of papers all semester; postponing giving a grade until the end of the course; dealing with the resistance of four classes of writers each semester; having to counter charges of grade inflation knowing that, with **my** help and a choice of their best work, most students would be able to create a portfolio worthy of a B or better by the end of the semester; and adding to my own paper load were the factors which kept me from turning my process classroom into a portfolio one.

For the past four years, I had resisted joining a group of my colleagues at Western Illinois University who had switched to the portfolio system and wanted me to participate in their portfolio

exchanges at midterm and the end of the semester. Randy Smith, the organizer of this exchange, continued to bombard me with articles about the advantages of portfolio use. In addition to the desire to be a part of the lively discussions which resulted from this exchange, many aspects of portfolio use were appealing: the students' ability to take risks in their writing when they knew that not all pieces would be graded, the students' ultimate acceptance that they could improve their papers significantly through revision, their coming to trust the advice of their peers, and their pride in their completed portfolios.

Therefore, when I began to teach Western's new 200 level course in our four-year writing across the curriculum sequence, I was looking for a compromise. Developing a shorter portfolio unit seemed to be a way to use the best aspects of the portfolio system without many of the disadvantages.

Drafting for a Portfolio Unit

In switching our old English 101-102 freshman writing sequence to one course in the freshman year and the second in the sophomore year, Western Illinois University's composition staff, with Writing Director, Bruce Leland, changed the focus. English 180 concentrated on writing to learn using the text Discovery while English 280 looked at the relationship between writing and reading using the text Connections. The 280 course began, therefore, with a review of the writing process and the concept of writing to learn and moved on to a study of the reading process; the remainder of the course applied this knowledge of the reading/writing connection to the use of authority in writing. The Process Portfolio was

created to encompass the writing required for the first four chapters of the book; it was completed and handed in after four weeks, thus removing the necessity of committing to portfolios for an entire semester.

Three papers were required of the students for this portfolio, but only one of those needed to be chosen for extensive revision. The first paper was written for a peer discussion on the third day of class: the assignment was for students to relate an experience when they had made a discovery about something when they were writing about it (review of writing to learn).

The second paper in this unit was a description of the student's writing process. We had done several exercises in class; two of the most successful were a comparison with the writing process of the author, Bruce Leland, and a free writing exercise in which I asked them to develop metaphors for their writing process. This second paper in discovery-draft form was handed in to me the Monday of the third week of class.

For the final draft required in the portfolio, the students were given a choice of two assignments based on the reading process. They could either describe their reading process or describe the way their experiences and background affected their reading of a particular essay. A copy of this paper was brought into class and sent home with one of their classmates to evaluate and offer suggestions for revision. Before sending the papers out for comment, we evaluated a sample reading profile in class. By doing this modeling in class, the students learned the type of

comments which would be most helpful for revision. Finally, after each student had written suggestions for revision on a classmate's paper, the two who had exchanged papers were given time in class to discuss their comments.

The Reading Journal

In addition to three discovery drafts described above, the students were keeping a reading journal. For each class period they were assigned reactions to chapters or readings in the text or reactions to their own reading or writing processes. In class, we sometimes tried additional exercises in the journal such as composing a list of the steps for active reading or a collaborative one-paragraph summary of the reading; I wrote these with the class.

One of the most successful entries was used to introduce the way context and feelings affect reading a work. In class the students read Gwendolyn Brooks' "The Mother" and wrote individual reactions to the poem (Leland, Connections, 57). Then they compared their reactions. The discussion became quite heated and provided examples for their papers on the effect of context on reading.

To help with revision strategies, I used copies of the report by Richard Light on the successful revision strategies of Harvard students and asked my classes to read and summarize this report in their journals. In class we chose one suggestion, free writing where the reader has asked for more details; students found a place in one of their drafts which needed more details; and we did the free writing in class.

Giving Feedback for the Portfolio

During the fourth week in the semester, the students had drafts of three separate papers with evaluations from either peers or from me. One aspect of the increased paper load mentioned by so many participants at Miami University's New Directions in Portfolio Assessment Conference was avoided by my commenting on only one set of these papers; the other two sets were evaluated by classmates. Prior to the first in-class exchange, the class had brainstormed in groups a list of the elements of good writing. From their groups' lists, I had compiled a discussion sheet (Appendix A). I did not collect these drafts but did circulate and answer questions when the **groups** asked for my advice.

The second set of papers in this portfolio sequence was the set I evaluated. One of the concerns about portfolios is the role of the teacher's comments on student revisions; the paper becomes the teacher's rather than the student's. Charles Schuster, in his presentation at the Miami conference on portfolio assessment, suggested interrogative comments on students' papers to avoid appropriation of student texts. That is a strategy which I have used successfully and tried to use on this set of papers. Sample comments on Susan's paper illustrate the type of comments I tried to place.

> Susan's original: Even the phrase "Writing Process" sends shudders up and down my spine.
>
> My comment: Why do these words send shudders?
>
> Susan's addition: ...they conjure the image of a little old man bent over a sheep-skin notebook writing diligently, taking time away from his work only to

scratch his head with his red quill pen.

> Susan's original: The third and final part of my writing process is revisions. This is usually the part that takes the longest, because along with being a world-class procrastinator, I am somewhat of a perfectionist.
>
> My comment: What are you actually doing here as you revise?
>
> Susan's addition: During my revisions, I read my paper over and over, sometimes even aloud, to make sure that I have not included senseless babbling into my paper....I look for repetitive words and phrases because who wants to read the same thing over and over? Since I usually write everything preceding my final paper in a notebook, as I type my paper on my word processor, I use Spell-check, and as I type, I check my spelling as well. During this last stage of revision, my typing is usually accompanied by numerous beeps as the evidence of my terrible spelling is once again announced.

I will admit that it was more difficult to "grade" these papers because I wasn't really grading them. I couldn't look for justifications for my grade; I had to look for ways to improve the students' writing. The point-of-view which I used was puzzled reader: "If you want to choose this paper to revise for your final draft, the reader has a question here." or "You say you organized before you wrote, but I can't see your organizational strategies. How did you decide what ideas to put first and so forth?"

I did, however, say at the end of each paper: if you put the paper in your portfolio as it is now, it will receive a U or a C or in, at least two cases, an A. Then I showed the class the gradebook with no letter grades recorded--only satisfactory for turning in the drafts (S- for U and S+ for A). That strategy seemed to encourage more substantial revisions than the traditional system.

Another concern expressed at the Miami Conference was the increased number of poor first drafts handed in to the teachers for evaluation when the students knew these drafts were not going to be graded (Neal). Counting the drafts as a daily grade and giving an S- or U for poor quality drafts might alleviate the problem somewhat. However, what the students were actually doing with these sloppy drafts, whether they intended to or not, was asking for help earlier in the process; Harris's study of composing processes suggested that this early feedback might be helpful for both multi-draft and one-draft writers. The multi-draft writers (and I suspect that most of these poor drafts were coming from multi-draft writers) will be forced to get their writing ready for a reader sooner than they might have otherwise; the true one-draft writers will be encouraged to consider additional composing options which they may have shut out in their thinking processes.

Chris, the author of one of those A papers, raised another concern: what about one-draft writers in a portfolio system? Will they be graded down if they do not make substantial revisions? Or what about students who compose entirely on the word processor, make revisions as they go, and do not have many drafts to show the revisions they have made?

> Chris: I don't like the stress on the number of revisions that the author of our textbook places on this type of situation. I have been writing extensively for over ten years. While, by comparison, this is not a lot of experience, I have been able to create a writing system which has efficiency as its main goal. For me, more than two drafts is superfluous, since my first draft is comparable to two or three written drafts.

An anecdote from 1988' Miami's Writing Teacher as Researcher

Conference also illustrates this point: Lester Faigley was puzzled when he saw his son, who composed his papers on the word processor, laboriously writing out his school essay by hand. When asked what he was doing, Faigley's son replied that he was writing the rough draft for his completed paper.

Although not completely countering the concern of true one-draft writers, I encouraged students to print out drafts more frequently during the composing process; Chris admitted that he was actually sending earlier drafts into hyperspace. On the second portfolio unit for the class, he noted these changes in his revision strategies:

> While my writing style is prohibitive of printed revision copies, I made myself adapt to the style prescribed. Every time I found myself planning a major revision on screen, I would stop and print a copy of the before and after result. This became much more time consuming (and admittedly sometimes disruptive) but it allowed me to see how much revision I really do without even realizing it. I changed quite a lot from first draft to the last.

The requirement to have drafts for exchanges in class or to send home with the teacher also produced at least two drafts of each paper. They weren't equal drafts; all three of Chris's discovery drafts looked more polished than some students' final portfolio revisions.

As composition teachers, we've read that the students need to learn how to evaluate their own writing, yet I, too, felt guilty sending the third set of papers home with the students instead of tucking them into my carry all. Because this wasn't the **only** set of papers, however, I thought I could take the risk that some students might not receive significant feedback.

Selections from Greg's original paper on the effect of context on his reading of John Pfeiffer's "Girl Talk-Boy Talk" (Leland, Connections, 329), the suggestions for revision from Dean, and the changes made during revision illustrate the success of taking that risk.

> Greg's original: I dove feet first into the essay with my eyes wide open to search for information I could use the next day when I came back to defend my position.
>
> Dean put parentheses around the phrase "with my eyes wide open" and commented in the margin, "Is this necessary?"
>
> Greg's revision: I dove into the essay with one intent, to get information I could use to prove my adversary wrong.
>
> Greg's original: ...I ran across a line in the text that changed my entire outlook. They were four simple words, preceded by male dominance, "I can top that." That was all I had to see and it triggered that feeling inside that none of us like and this little voice inside of me said, "I was wrong."
>
> Dean's comments: You mention hardly anything regarding "Girl Talk-Boy Talk" and don't really discuss the interpretation at all. "I can top that," is one sentence out of so many! A whole essay. You never really explained why you were wrong or how you remedied it.
>
> Greg's revision: I stumbled across a pair of sentences that put my whole argument in the trash and hers in the spotlight. The two sentences said, "Men spend considerable time playing the dominance game, either at the joking level or for real. The telling of a tall tale, followed by a still taller tale in an I-can-top-that atmosphere seems typically male" (332). At that point, this little voice inside of me told me that I was wrong.
>
> I continued to read the essay but not with the same zeal as before. I came across point after point which seemed to favor her argument, that whether consciously or unconsciously, men in many cases do try to dominate....

Evaluating the Process Portfolio

The final portfolio consisted of a two-sided portfolio jacket:

on one side were the cover letter, the final revised paper, and all drafts for that paper. On the other side were the reading journal and the drafts of the two papers which the students decided not to revise. Next semester I will follow a good suggestion from Greg's cover letter:

> In closing, I would just like to make one suggestion to you for the future. At the beginning of the year when discussing the process portfolio, have an example on hand to show the class. Maybe even pass it around the room and let the students thumb through it to get an idea of what you expect from them. It all came together in the end for me, but I was really lost in the beginning and I'm not sure if I was alone in being lost.

Greg volunteered his portfolio as a sample to use for the class, so it will be easy to follow his suggestion.

In grading these portfolios, I considered the two systems defined by Jeffrey Sommers: the portfolio grading system (155) and the holistic system (159). In one, the students choose their best work to be graded; in the other all of the students' writing is included for evaluation. Seeing advantages to both, I used elements of both in the way I graded these portfolios. I placed two grades, one for the quality of the revised paper and the other on the journal. This dual grading allowed me to keep a relatively high standard for the product at the same time that I could reward the amount of effort involved in journal entries and multiple drafts. Just about every combination of grades resulted, ranging from A/A to U/B+. Four weeks out of a semester is approximately one-fourth of the total, so the two grades together were worth one-fourth of the students' grade.

Conclusions

At the beginning of the fifth week of the semester, the students had written three papers, participated in a peer exchange in class, put multiple entries in their reading journals, taken one peer's paper home to evaluate closely, chosen one essay to revise, written a cover letter to evaluate their process, and compiled a process portfolio. I had graded one set of discovery drafts and one set of portfolios. Admittedly, both of these sets took longer to grade than a set in most traditional classrooms, but not that much longer. The quality of the papers and the amount of reflection on their writing and reading processes evidenced in the students' cover letters and reading journals justified the slight increase in grading time.

> Susan: Before I wrote this paper, I had not stopped to think about what I have to go through to write a paper. Honestly, it never really entered my mind that it might be important. As I wrote this paper, I realized that I would be better off if I put more time and effort into my papers.
>
> Dean: I suppose I knew everything I needed to know about this paper before I wrote it; it's just that I didn't know I knew it. I had simply never explored my own reading process before. I can't say that my ideas on this topic really changed while I was working on the paper, because I didn't know what the ideas were. The paper really brought them out.
>
> Yvonne: The paper in question, "Stepping Stones," was written in order for me to explore my writing style. To be honest, I did not realize that I wrote in any particular style or pattern until this paper. When I was finished writing, I was amazed to find that there was both rhyme and reason to my writing. More amazing to me was the fact that I use the same process in all of my papers. I had never given any thought to how I write. I thought it was something that just happened after years and years of practice. How wrong I was.

Yvonne also wondered about the ultimate purpose of such a portfolio unit. She noted that in her high school all papers from freshman through senior years were kept in a portfolio so the students could track their writing progress. "I have never had to do a portfolio of this type before.... I do not understand what this portfolio is going to accomplish. It is not for us to track our writing, because for most of us this will probably be the last English course we take."

I answered her query by asking her to read Susan's portfolio, if Susan were willing, and note the changes between the first and final drafts in that paper. Susan's changes convinced all three of us that trying a portfolio unit was a good idea; the process had allowed her to create a substantive paper more complete with sensory images.

Epilogue

These same students did a second authority portfolio instead of the research paper with some interesting results. The students first wrote a problem/solution paper following the more traditional research paper format; I was able to evaluate those and comment on paraphrase and documentation skills without placing a grade. Then the students had the choice of an extended interview or a case study of a process (including a longer case study of their writing process which could make use of the process paper in the first portfolio); fellow students did an in-class peer discussion of this second paper using the same questions from Appendix A and also took a classmate's paper home for written comments. Then, as in the

process portfolio, they chose one of these two for revision and editing, submitting all their drafts in an Authority Portfolio.

Susan (in Law Enforcement Administration) and Yvonne (in Pre-med) wrote a collaborative research paper on the ethical concerns of genetic engineering and did their case study on how they composed the collaborative paper; Greg wrote his research paper on the effects of divorce on children incorporating the best quotes from his interview with a child of divorce; Dean interviewed a homosexual male on the process of staying in the closet in a college community; and Chris (also in Law Enforcement Administration) wrote his on serial sexual homicides. All of these papers will be included in a collection of the best papers being compiled by our Writing Committee to serve as an example for future 280 classes. Since this paper began with a quote from Chris, I'll let him have the last word:

> This portfolio was <u>extraordinary</u>! I love this system when the topic selection is left up to the student. It allows me to regain the feeling of creating a small "study" of the topic. The whole portfolio concept has evolved into a sound one, allowing students to build on previous drafts while working on the whole project. Thank you for allowing the freedom of research and organization with this portfolio.

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Appendix A

This peer worksheet was developed by having each class in groups discuss and list the elements the students felt were important in writing. These questions are a synthesis of their lists.

English 280-Peer Worksheet

Remember to point out sections that you **like**, too!

Content: *Is the focus clear? (Does the paper have a thesis/focusing sentence? Is that sentence understandable? Is that sentence in the first paragraph?)
How do the ideas (examples/images) support or prove this focus? Are they clear and interesting?
*Where are more examples or details needed?
How does the lead capture your attention? Could it be made more interesting?
Does the conclusion end the paper in an effective way?
Did more ideas come to mind while writing this paper or during this workshop that you could add to this paper?

Structure: Is there a clear introduction, body and conclusion?
*Are ideas in the most effective order? Does the paper flow? Does it ramble?
What transitions are used to tie the paper together (cohesion)? Where are more, better or different ones needed?
Are there any ideas that don't fit?

Style: How is the language appropriate for the audience? Informal enough? Too informal?
How does it show the writer's feeling toward the topic?
What methods does the writer use to appeal to the audience?

Mechanics: Point out areas that need special attention:
paragraphing
sentence structure
verb tense, subject verb agreement
spelling
Other (specify)

Or you could go with one group's suggestion, scrap this entire sheet, and just ask:
What is wrong with this draft?

How may I improve this draft?